

What is claimed is:

1. A method of providing a help facility for a computer software application, the method comprising:

enabling an author to generate one or more help files that specify content to be displayed and at least one interactive link that, when activated, performs an operation in the computer software application associated with the specified content; and

enabling the help facility, while executing, to access the generated one or more help files upon detecting that the one or more help files exist in a predetermined location within a local file structure accessible to the help facility.

2. The method of claim 1 further comprising, prior to enabling the help facility to access the generated help file, placing the help file in the predetermined location.

3. The method of claim 2 wherein the help file is placed in the predetermined location by the author of the help file.

4. The method of claim 2 wherein the help file is placed in the predetermined location automatically by a software process.

5. The method of claim 1 further comprising retrieving the generated one or more help files from an external source.

6. The method of claim 1 wherein the external source comprises a remote resource on a network.

7. The method of claim 1 wherein enabling the help facility to access the one or more help files comprises displaying the one or more help files as a help page in the help facility.

8. The method of claim 1 wherein enabling the help facility to access the generated one or more help files comprises causing the help facility to traverse the local file structure to identify existing help files.

9. The method of claim 8 wherein the help facility dynamically generates a listing of available help topics based on help files identified during traversal.

10. The method of claim 8 wherein the help facility dynamically generates a table of contents file based on help files identified during traversal.

11. The method of claim 1 wherein the help facility is caused to detect the existence of one or more help files in response to a user action.

12. The method of claim 1 wherein the help facility is caused to detect the existence of one or more help files automatically.

13. The method of claim 1 wherein enabling an author to generate one or more help files comprises enabling the author to record a sequence of one or more user activities performed in the computer software application.

14. The method of claim 1 wherein the interactive link comprises a hyperlink, a hotspot or a graphical button.

15. The method of claim 1 wherein the operation in the computer software application associated with the interactive link comprises an atomic step of a complex operation.

16. The method of claim 1 wherein the operation in the computer software application associated with the interactive

link comprises a plurality of steps associated with a complex operation.

17. The method of claim 1 wherein the operation in the computer software application associated with the interactive link corresponds to a menu item in a graphical user interface of the computer software application.

18. The method of claim 1 wherein the operation in the computer software application associated with the interactive link corresponds to an operation available through an application program interface of the computer software application.

19. The method of claim 1 wherein enabling the author to generate one or more help files comprises providing a markup language extension that enables an activity in the computer software application to be performed indirectly.

20. A method of providing a help facility for a computer software application, the method comprising:

enabling a computer software application to record a sequence of one or more user operations performed within the computer software application; and

enabling a user to generate one or more help files that specify help content to be presented and at least one interactive link that, when activated, performs the recorded sequence of one or more operations.

21. The method of claim 20 further comprising enabling the generated one or more help files to be displayed as a help page in the help facility.

22. The method of claim 21 further comprising enabling the help facility, while executing, to access the generated one or more help files upon detecting that the one or more files exist in a predetermined location within a local file structure accessible to the help facility.

23. The method of claim 21 further comprising, in response to user input, selectively performing the one or more operations based on a state of the computer application.

24. The method of claim 23 wherein selectively performing the one or more operations comprises refraining from attempting to perform an operation if the computer software application is in an improper state for performing the operation.

25. The method of claim 24 further comprising informing the user of one or steps to undertake to place the computer software application in a proper state to perform the operation.

26. A method of controlling a help facility for a computer software application, the method comprising:

enabling a user to generate one or more help files that specify content to be presented and at least one interactive link that, when activated, performs an operation in the computer software application associated with the content; and

enabling the help facility to detect a state of the computer software application and to selectively cause the operation to be performed by the computer software application based on the detected state.

27. The method of claim 26 wherein enabling the user to generate help files comprises enabling the computer software

application to record a sequence of one or more user operations performed within the computer software application.

28. The method of claim 26 wherein the help facility refrains from causing the operation to be performed if the computer software application is in improper state for performing the operation.

29. The method of claim 28 further comprising informing the user of one or steps to undertake to place the computer software application in a proper state to perform the operation.

30. Machine-readable instructions, embodied in a tangible medium or a propagated signal or both, for causing the machine to perform operations comprising:

enable an author to generate one or more help files for a help facility of a computer software application, the one or more help files specifying content to be displayed and at least one interactive link that, when activated, performs an operation in the computer software application associated with the specified content; and

enable the help facility, while executing, to access the generated one or more help files upon detecting that the one or

more help files exist in a predetermined location within a local file structure accessible to the help facility.

31. The instructions of claim 30 further comprising instructions to automatically place the help file in the predetermined location.

32. The instructions of claim 30 further comprising instructions to retrieve the generated one or more help files from an external source.

33. The instructions of claim 32 further comprising instructions to display the one or more help files as a help page in the help facility.

34. The instructions of claim 30 wherein the instructions to enable the help facility to access the generated one or more help files comprise instructions to cause the help facility to traverse the local file structure to identify existing help files.

35. The instructions of claim 34 further comprising instructions to dynamically generate a listing of available help topics based on help files identified during traversal.

36. The instructions of claim 34 further comprising instructions to dynamically generate a table of contents file based on help files identified during traversal.

37. The instructions of claim 30 further comprising instructions to cause the help facility to detect the existence of one or more help files in response to a user action.

38. The instructions of claim 30 further comprising instructions to cause the help facility to detect the existence of one or more help files automatically.

39. The instructions of claim 1 wherein the instructions to enable an author to generate one or more help files comprise instructions to enable the author to record a sequence of one or more user activities performed in the computer software application.

40. An extensible help facility for a computer software application, the help facility comprising:

    a graphical user interface for communicating with a user;

    a plurality of help files arranged in a hierarchical file structure; and

    one or more software processes configured to perform the following operations:

- (i)       enable a user to generate or modify one or more help files that specify content to be displayed and at least one interactive link that, when activated, performs an operation in the computer software application associated with the specified content;
- (ii)      cause the help facility, while executing, to access the generated one or more help files upon detecting that the one or more help files exist in a predetermined location within the hierarchical file structure; and
- (iii)     cause the help facility to detect a state of the computer software application and to selectively cause an operation corresponding to an interactive link to be performed by the computer software application based on the detected state.